

Mediated cultures of mobility: the art of positioning ethnography in global landscapes

Greschke, Heike Mónica

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version
Konferenzbeitrag / conference paper

Zur Verfügung gestellt in Kooperation mit / provided in cooperation with:
SSG Sozialwissenschaften, USB Köln

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Greschke, H. M. (2010). *Mediated cultures of mobility: the art of positioning ethnography in global landscapes*. (COMCAD Working Papers, 78). Bielefeld: Universität Bielefeld, Fak. für Soziologie, Centre on Migration, Citizenship and Development (COMCAD). <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-377768>

Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer Deposit-Lizenz (Keine Weiterverbreitung - keine Bearbeitung) zur Verfügung gestellt. Gewährt wird ein nicht exklusives, nicht übertragbares, persönliches und beschränktes Recht auf Nutzung dieses Dokuments. Dieses Dokument ist ausschließlich für den persönlichen, nicht-kommerziellen Gebrauch bestimmt. Auf sämtlichen Kopien dieses Dokuments müssen alle Urheberrechtshinweise und sonstigen Hinweise auf gesetzlichen Schutz beibehalten werden. Sie dürfen dieses Dokument nicht in irgendeiner Weise abändern, noch dürfen Sie dieses Dokument für öffentliche oder kommerzielle Zwecke vervielfältigen, öffentlich ausstellen, aufführen, vertreiben oder anderweitig nutzen.

Mit der Verwendung dieses Dokuments erkennen Sie die Nutzungsbedingungen an.

Terms of use:

This document is made available under Deposit Licence (No Redistribution - no modifications). We grant a non-exclusive, non-transferable, individual and limited right to using this document. This document is solely intended for your personal, non-commercial use. All of the copies of this documents must retain all copyright information and other information regarding legal protection. You are not allowed to alter this document in any way, to copy it for public or commercial purposes, to exhibit the document in public, to perform, distribute or otherwise use the document in public.

By using this particular document, you accept the above-stated conditions of use.

Dr. Heike Mónica Greschke*

Mediated cultures of mobility: The art of positioning ethnography in global landscapes

Paper presented at the conference on 'Migration(s) and Development(s):
Transformation of Paradigms, Organisations and Gender', Center for
Interdisciplinary Research, Bielefeld, Germany, July 10-11, 2009

COMCAD Arbeitspapiere - Working Papers

General Editor: Thomas Faist

No. 78, 2010

Greschke, Mónika

Mediated cultures of mobility: The art of positioning in global landscapes

Bielefeld: COMCAD, 2010

(General Editor: Thomas Faist; Working Papers – Centre on Migration, Citizenship and Development; 78)

The COMCAD Working Paper Series is intended to aid the rapid distribution of work in progress, research findings and special lectures by researchers and associates of COMCAD. Papers aim to stimulate discussion among the worldwide community of scholars, policymakers and practitioners. They are distributed free of charge in PDF format via the COMCAD website.

The opinions expressed in the papers are solely those of the author/s who retain the copyright. Comments on individual Working Papers are welcomed, and should be directed to the author/s.

Bielefeld University
Faculty of Sociology
Centre on Migration, Citizenship and Development (COMCAD)
Postfach 100131
D-33501 Bielefeld
Homepage: <http://www.uni-bielefeld.de/tdrc>

Introduction

This paper explores ethnography's capability for understanding new cultural practices and techno-social realities, which have been emerging along with digital media usage in contemporary migration contexts. In the first part, an 'ethnic group' will be introduced that inhabits a common virtual space in the World Wide Web (WWW), while being physically located in different socio-geographical contexts. Nonetheless, as so called 'transmigrants' most of the members do not remain 'located' anywhere at all. They are profoundly mobile, travelling virtually and physically between different sites of being, sites of wanting-to-know, and sites of belonging – to name just a few. Ethnographic research on mediated cultures of mobility poses a set of problems, which requires thorough reflection as well as a search for creative solutions: We have to delimit and enter fields, which transcend the notions of classical ethnography in the literal sense; we find multi-media data types, for which there are hardly any proven methods available; we aim to describe realities, for which the social sciences literally are at a loss for words. In other words, the more mobile and (computer)mediated migrants' everyday lives are, the less suitable many of the procedures and assumptions turn out to be, that had long been taken for granted in ethnography.

How then are we supposed to understand these emerging cultures and techno-social realities? Is there any possibility to position an ethnographic project facing social life on the move? What does it mean to delimit research 'fields' in global landscapes? And, finally, how can we grasp the participatory role of technology in creating and maintaining migrants' life worlds and cultures?

Taking the research on 'Cibervalle' as an example, this paper critically examines the meaning of some key concepts of classical ethnography, like field, field entrance and positioning fieldwork as well as (non)-participant observation. Since Marcus has initiated the global turn in ethnography, a vast amount of literature discussing the meaning and practicality of multi-siting has emerged. This paper will also address this debate by indicating and clarifying some conceptional misperceptions, as well as by contributing a set of multi-siting methods, which have been developed along with the research on Cibervalle. I will offer an example of how ethnographers can use reflexivity as a resource, first to develop 'uniquely adequate' methods and concepts (Garfinkel & Wieder 1992), and second to analyse the interactions between advancing technologies and the cultural practices of appropriation.

At home in www.cibervalle.com - Paraguayan places and modes of mobility in the digital era www.cibervalle.com, is the name for an online discussion forum, that connects Paraguayans from all over the world. In contrast to the existing body of literature on diasporic mediascapes (Karim 2003, Adams 2004) and transnational populations' internet usage (Uimonen 2003, Graham & Khosravi 2002), which tends to focus on common political interests as starting points for virtual representations, the Paraguayan online discussion forum started neither with a thematic focus nor with a common political goal. The beginning of this community was an electronic bulletin board, which was part of the technological environment of a commercial Paraguayan web portal. One of the principal users explains: "The first time I entered the forum there were only five users. I have the number 6 haha. There was nobody, not even a hair moved. I began to invite friends, that's how the forum began to grow" (Manuela, Asunción, e-mail interview, my own translation). Over the years, the forum has been accessed by more and more people (mostly Paraguayans) from all over the world – that is to say from Paraguay, Argentina, Spain, France, Japan, the U.S.A., Australia, Canada, etc. At the time of access, the participants of the online forum did not know each other personally. Belonging to Paraguay, however, appears to become a functional category of social organization and orientation within the global framework of cyberspace that brings together the needs of Paraguayans abroad with the desires of those wanting to leave the country and the interests of compatriots remaining in Paraguay.

The meaning of Cibervalle differs depending on the users' socio-cultural context: For those accessing Cibervalle from Paraguay, the electronic network provides exclusively access to remote cultures and areas of the world, as for economic reasons most Paraguayans hardly can afford long-distance tourism. Virtual mobility, however, is also an exclusive commodity in Paraguay, because the prices for internet access are among the highest in Latin America (Greschke, forthcoming). Accordingly, the users located in Paraguay are part of a small affluent class with higher education, most of them working in a professional sector that allows them free access to the internet. From Paraguayans abroad, Cibervalle is often called a „window to Paraguay“, through which they do not only keep themselves up to date regarding current political and social issues, but rather keep themselves involved in their socio-cultural context of origin on a regular, intimate and day-to-day basis. While the degree of engagement differs among the users, over the years the former anonymous socio-electronic network has become a central part of the everyday-lives of both - the users in Paraguay and abroad - as the following statement indicates:

It's true that, unconsciously, Cibervalle turns into your everyday-life. At least once a day you have to stop by, in order to know what's going on. You enter because you need to know if

everybody feels fine or if someone's having a heartache, or because you want to see Eduardo's current hairstyle ...etc. etc. ... (Carmen, France, Cibervalle-forum, my own translation).

The communities' social life relies on specific communicative practices joining several mediated forms of communication with co-presence based encounters. These practices allude to the emergence of global forms of living together. The very nature of global togetherness, its technological requirements and social implications are discussed elsewhere (Greschke 2008, 2009). In the following, I will focus on the methodological challenges that I had to cope with while trying to develop an ethnographic project on a cultural formation that has been constantly moving within a global landscape of seemingly infinite interconnections and overlapping contexts. As a matter of fact, both researchers and users have to find ways to access and move within such a confusing landscape. I will therefore depart from the point of view of one user and follow her steps and practices by which she has been exploring Cibervalle. By doing so, I will not only illuminate the different dimensions and places of Cibervalle and how they are interrelated. Furthermore, following a user's pathway, I will suggest a way of developing an uniquely adequate research design consisting of methods and choices that are geared to and reflect the idiosyncrasies of the studied culture.

The following post was cited from the online-forum Cibervalle. A user who lives in Buenos Aires - she calls herself Iwashita for the purpose of my research report - explains how she came across the electronic network.

Once I was bored sitting in front of the screen of my pc and I thought: internet, internet, my boyfriend says there is everything for anyone, ndeee imagine that! And me, what I am going to do? Very well then google: 'Paraguay'. The first thing to appear was cibervalle.com. I entered, registered myself and began to follow the discussion threads, sometimes I posted some comments and one day I decided to post a thread of my own... I came to know some of the Argentinean members, I went to an encuentro and that's how I had my first meeting with Paraguayans in Argentina. Until then, I had never met any Paraguayan here during the whole four years I had been in Argentina. It was a very good experience and I turned to re-appreciate my culture as well as my country¹ (Iwashita, Buenos Aires, Cibervalle-forum, my own translation).

¹ Yo estaba una vez aburrida frente a la computadora pensando, internet, internet, mi novio dice que

Iwashitas' statement does not only exemplify a typical way of becoming a member of the Cibervalle community, it also alludes to the different dimensions this socio-electronic formation consists of. Most of the users incorporate themselves into the socio-electronic network before having any personal relations within the group. Like Iwashita, they may come across the website by chance, while trying to look around the infinite depths of cyberspace or while looking for particular information about Paraguay. Normally, newbies first follow the discussions conducted by others as lurkers², that is to say, invisible for the active members, in order to become familiar with the topics and the implicit rules of participation before they register and present themselves as active participants to the community. The members of the community then welcome the new participants and invite them to the next meeting that is usually organized in the respective localities of residence, like Buenos Aires, Asunción, or New York. However, the local subgroups, which have been evolving over time, by no means supersede the virtual relationships. The members' activities on the local sites are rather reconstructed collectively on the globally accessible online forum in order to share the event with the geographically distant counterparts. By these means, a global community has evolved, consisting of different local sites, which are interrelated with a jointly created computer-mediated site of social life. Table 1 provides an overview of the different sites, their linkages and the problems of defining boundaries, which are attended by the hybridization of public with private and virtually to physically grounded sites.

hay todo de todo y para todos, ndeeeee qué cosas no? y yo qué voy a hacer, y bueno google: Paraguay, lo primero que apareció fué cibervalle.com me metí me registré y leía los comentarios, opinaba aveces y un día decidí abrir un tópico ... fuí conociendo a algunos de Argentina, fuí a un encuentro, y así tuve mi primer encuentro con paraguayos en Argentina. Hacía cuatro años que estaba en Argentina y nunca había conocido a un paraguayo acá. Fué una muy buena experiencia y volví a apreciar mi cultura y mi país

² Concept coined by internet research to describe the social position of anonymous readers in internet-based public spheres.

Table 1

| sites as techno-social conduits | the sites' positions and linkages within Cibervalle | constraints and devices of defining boundaries |
|---|---|---|
| Online discussion forum text- and imagebased, many-to-many-communication, asyn- chronous/synchronous, lurker, active participant | virtual site, the communities' center stage | open to the public, potentially global in extent, real range can neither be controlled nor assumed |
| Instant messenger: text-, image-, voice-, video-based, pri- vate talk between two or more buddies, synchronous/virtual presence (through status display) active user/present buddy | virtual sites, the communities' back- stages, deeply inter- related with the ac- tivities on the online- discussion forum and the respective physi- cal grounded sites | potentially global in geographical terms, real range controllable and limited to technological constraints and social networks (buddy lists), which divides the global network into local (mostly timezone de- pendent) subgroups |
| Public local meetings (are previously announcend and afterwards documented on the online discussion forum): face-to-face-communication/local meet- ings in <i>public</i> places (due to the subse- quent documentation on the online dis- cussion forum, even if the local event occurs in private) | physically grounded sites in the respective places of residence in Paraguayan cities, Buenos Aires, France, New York, etc. | basically open to the public, real range not controllable, but mostly limited in geographical terms to the users places of residence, new members are always expected |
| Private local meetings (are announced only within the respective local sub- groups via instant messenger, sms or phone): face-to-face-communication/local meet- ings in public, semi-public or private places | physically grounded sites in the respective places of residence in Paraguayan cities, Buenos Aires, France, New York, Japan, etc. | extent limited/controllable to local subgroups/social networks in the respective places of residence, differ from the public and the private vir- tual sites |

So far, I have introduced an ethnic group, whose strangeness possibly results less from their ethno-national 'otherness', than from the cultural practices of mediated mobility and togetherness, which have been evolving along the process of appropriation of digital media in their everyday lives. The Cibervaller@s inhabit a common virtual space in the World Wide Web (WWW), while being physically located in different socio-geographical contexts. Potentially global in its geographical extent, this social formation is constituted by means of interrelating virtual-global dimensions with physically grounded parts of the actors' lifeworlds. More

precisely, Cibervalle becomes a shared social space which spans between physical grounded localities in some Paraguayan cities, Buenos Aires, New York and other places all over the world. In addition, the community's social life relies on cross media architecture, joining the www-based public site and more private mediated forms of communication, like instant messaging and use of (mobile) phones with co-presence based encounters.

The construction of Cibervalle as a place where to go and meet friends, in order to join events and share everyday-live, however, is an ongoing practical achievement. Due to the interrelation of private and public sites, the boundaries of this social formation are by all means neither static nor easily to define, not even for the actors themselves. Boyd (2009) suggests that „when we look to understand people's practices online, we must understand the context within which the individuals think they are operating. This imagined context provides one mechanism for bounding our research“ (31). Ethnographic research in pluri-local and computer-mediated fields indeed raises a lot of questions regarding the relation of contents and contexts. While in the first part of the paper the attempt was made to describe a social formation on the basis of already available research findings, the following part aims to reflect the methodological procedure and the decisions I made during the research process that brought about these results. Of course, it would go far beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the entire research process. I will therefore only briefly outline the research design, and then focus on how I negotiated the challenges of field construction and access. Finally, I will reflect on some 'uniquely adequate' research methods that account as much for the actors' imaginations about contexts, as for their practices on- and offline and the “architectural properties of mediated sociality” (Boyd 2009: 30) that affect these practices.

The research design of Cibervalle at a glance:

1. Occasion-guided field construction: i.e. obtaining and analyzing naturally occurred data to sketch a preliminary 'roadmap' for further fieldwork;
2. Field access by stages: i.e. 'becoming member' and positional changes in the field as a reflexive source for understanding the multiplicity of emic rules and cultural meanings;
3. Follow the people: 'traipsing' behind the subjects; learning by doing the same as them: appropriation of field practices as research methods;
4. Follow the technology: extended case study of interactions between advancing technologies and the social practices of their usage;

5. Cross-examination of data, methods and perspectives: genre analysis of online-communication patterns; ethnographic content and context analysis of social practices and cultural meanings³.

Logging into the field: Where to start and which subjects to follow?

The internet should not be regarded as too simply neither in spatial terms nor as a virtual reality separated from physically grounded contexts. As Markham (1998) argues, from the actors point of view the internet may be perceived and practiced in spatial terms, but it also can be considered a tool or a way of being. Miller and Slater point out, that virtuality should not be taken as a property of the social. In response to the common practice in internet research, which - by limiting fieldwork mostly on the virtual sites - tends to mystify 'virtual realities', the authors suggest to follow the reverse path: „If you want to get to the Internet don't start from there“ (2000:5). Hine (2009) considers exploring cultural constructions in a field without assuming its boundaries in advance to be one of the biggest challenges of ethnographic research on the internet. Defining the boundaries of the research project thus becomes an ongoing task during the whole research process. It requires taking a set of decisions during fieldwork, regarding entrance or starting points, the traces to follow and the moment when to stop field work. Multi-siting in ethnographic internet research thus becomes crucial in terms of moving around sites, relating sites of production and use, online and off-line, or following traces across social networks and different media.

Unlike Slater and Miller suggest, I started from the internet, but I did not stop there. As Iwashita and many other participants, I approached Cibervalle as a lurker. I entered the public online discussion forum and followed the activities hiding myself in front of the screen. Some literature on virtual ethnography calls this practice non-participant observation in contrast to participant observation, which is the case if the researcher actively takes part in the communications. The distinction between these two modes of observation strikes me as less plausible as the decision for only one of these practices of engagement with the field. Ethnographic research aims to study social situations and cultures in their own terms and complexities. Since lurking is a 'native' practice of the field, the lurking researcher gains access to those dimensions of computer mediated social life, which are not only open but rather addressed to

³ For more details on the research design see Greschke 2009.

lurkers – for active (and competent) participants of public virtual spaces act in the knowledge that they always can be observed anonymously. The very fact that there is an own term for this role, points to the fact that the lurker has a firm place in the social structure of public online-formations. According to Boyd, the invisible audience is one of the „four key architectural properties of mediated sociality to keep in mind“⁴ (2009:30) while studying digital cultures. This raises the question whether we should talk about non-participant observation at all. Whatever we call it, if we adopt lurking as a research practice, we should be aware, that we take only one possible position within a complex system of communications. Ethnographers, who only engage with the role of the lurker, may easily get access and a great deal of - even „naturally occurring“ - data (Silverman 2007) on low cost. What they see and what they are able to understand, however, remains as limited as in the case of the 19th century armchair ethnography. Mann and Stewart stress the epistemological limitations of lurking, as they point to the „hidden areas“ of internet based communication: „It is only researchers who both 'find' these secret places, and who then negotiate access, who begin to grasp the boundaries of the community" (2000:90). Beaulieu accordingly argues that, "like in more conventional fieldwork, knowledge comes from engagement and interaction, always both purposive and incidental" (2004:150). The more important part of the term participant observation, then, is the „participant“, that is to say the ethnographer herself, who aims to become a member of the studied group, and lives among the people for a considerable period of time, participating and thereby learning the cultural practices and social order of the group.

It turns out, that even the virtual parts of computer-mediated research fields are highly complex and include various roles and degrees of involvement, which in an ethnographic research should be taken into account. Hine suggests: „Ethnography of the internet can, then, usefully be about mobility between contexts of production and use, and between online and offline, and it can creatively deploy forms of engagement to look at how these sites are socially constructed and at the same time are social conduits“ (Hine 2009:11).

When Marcus coined the widely quoted term „multi-sited-ethnography“ (1996 [1995]), he surely was not thinking of internet research in the first place. Studies on computer mediated cultures and social life, however, are hardly comprehensible without multi-siting strategies. This holds particularly true in the case study on Ciberville, which deals not only with global

⁴ in addition to persistence, searchability, replicability.

communication technologies, but also with transnational practices of migration. But how is it possible to move within such a complex, obviously borderless field, without getting lost? How to define appropriate field sites and boundaries?

Occasion-guided construction of the field

When I was still observing the activities in Cibervalle anonymously, a tragic accident happened in Paraguay's capital. A supermarket caught fire and caused the deaths of at least 400 people. This local tragedy turned into a global issue, turning the spotlight of global public interest onto Paraguay and, particularly, on the participants of Cibervalle. In fact, it was not only the number of victims, but the news value adherent to the supermarket owner's decision to close the doors of the building in order to stop customers from leaving without paying for their goods that turned the world's attention to a usually disregarded place on the globe. The tragedy of Ycua Bolaños caused one of the very rare, but in every moment possible situations, in which the public virtual site of Cibervalle turned into the spotlight of a globally distributed invisible audience, consisting of individuals, who came to know about the incident and searched the internet for more information. The tragedy of Ycua Bolaños, in other words, demarcated the outermost extent of Cibervalle and enabled me to assume the outer limits of the field. Consequently, I decided to archive the log files of all activities that were taking place on the online-discussion-forum in the course of this event. For one week, the Ycua Bolaños tragedy dominated the activities in Cibervalle, before the issue disappeared almost as suddenly as it had appeared. I thus constructed a field by sketching a preliminary frame, in which relevant dimensions and relationships, roles, practices and localities could be identified by way of analyzing a corpus of data that had not been provoked by the researcher (like data obtained by using i.e. research interviews) but existed independently of her intervention (Silverman 2007: 201ff). The advantages of this approach are, firstly, that the temporal, local and social relevancies are determined by the field itself, which would otherwise have had to be defined arbitrarily by the researcher. Secondly, the archived log files can be analysed as „documents“ of social life in Cibervalle's public virtual site. As a result of this first step of analysis, I obtained a provisional 'map' of the field with relevant dimensions and places, social roles and positions, and practices and modalities of communication. This map guided me on my way through the field and led me not only to some of the users' places of residence in Paraguay, Buenos Aires, California and Germany, but also to the hidden virtual places of Cibervalle.

Candea (2009) critically examines the potentials of multi-sited ethnography and complains that problems related to field construction in multi-sited projects mostly remain disregarded: „Its weakness lies in its lack of attention to processes of bounding, selection and choice – processes which any ethnographer has to undergo to reduce the initial indeterminacy of field experience into a meaningful account“ (2009:27). Of course, I made some pragmatic decisions about places I could include and others that had to be left out. While it was evidently important to include Paraguayan physical places, for analytical reasons I could have easily included more migrants' places of residence. If I had been able to visit the subgroup in New York, or some of the participants in Spain, for instance, I would probably have drawn a somewhat more colourful picture of Cibervalle. However, it was not only due to restricted economic and time resources that my roadmap through Cibervalle led me first to one participant in California (while I was a visiting scholar at UC Davis), then to the subgroup in Buenos Aires, before I finally arrived at the biographically (imaginatively) shared physical ground of the Cibervalle community, where I moved through the localities of the different subgroups and some of the actors' translocal landscapes.

Follow the people

As many other contemporary ethnographers who had read or heard about Marcus' considerations on multi-siting, I had to move around a lot, in order to follow the people to explore their translocal landscapes. The fact, that I met some people twice or more often in different places in and outside of Paraguay, one of them even in a neighbouring place of my hometown in Germany, also reflects the actors' high degree of mobility. However, I did not only follow the people in the literal sense on their travelling between sites of being and sites of belonging. I also traipsed behind them through everyday-life and they taught me how to do, what they are used to do while being a member of Cibervalle.

The decisions I made during the research process hence are not only pragmatic decisions, they also reflect main orientations and practices of the field: I first approached the public site of the field as a lurker. After a while I presented myself as a new member and was welcomed by the other members. I participated actively in the online-discussions proposing own (research related) topics and commenting to others. I maintained a messenger network for private conversations. I announced my travels to Buenos Aires and Paraguay on the online-forum and accepted invitations to local meetings. I commuted between Buenos Aires and several physical places in Paraguay. To my surprise, I nearly lost contact to the virtual sites

of Cibervalle when I was geographically at its centre and I shared these impressions with the global community:

I'll tell you something that seems peculiar to me and, at the same time explains why I missed the last posts in my discussion threads. When I travelled to Paraguay, I had almost no access to the Internet and so I had little opportunity to participate in Cibervalle. That is to say, when I was physically in the centre of the Cibervalle community, I felt disconnected and outside of it. I have been observing the same thing happening to other members: When they spend holidays with their families in Paraguay, they disappear from the forum and won't come back before leaving the community's physical centre stage. Isn't this curious? (Mafalda, Buenos Aires, Cibervalle-forum, my own translation)

Follow the technology

The development of computer mediated communication was still in its fledgling stage and broadband technology was not yet available, when the first Paraguayan internet travelers began to settle down in Cibervalle. Due to scarce communication modalities, the technological requisites were still insufficient for establishing personal relationships. The (long standing) members of Cibervalle have not only turned the former anonymous socio-electronic network into a community, thereby intimately connecting the electronic bulletin board with their physically embedded life-worlds. They also participated in a mutual learning process between technology development and practice. In the course of my research, I reconstructed the development of the communicative practices that had been emerging in Cibervalle over the years, from 2002 to 2005. For this purpose, I used a way-back machine that enabled me to find older versions of the electronic bulletin board and to examine the renovations made over time. It struck me that the systems infrastructure from 2002 to 2005 aimed as much at the enrichment of informational thickness of communication as on the enlargement of the variety of topics. Furthermore, they reflect changing modes of temporality. Via the ethnographic data, I could figure out that the technological development of the electronic bulletin board was strongly shaped by the users' needs and communicative practices. Furthermore, by participant observation and learning the members' practices on my own, I was able to grasp the meanings of those technological renovations, which I assume to be crucial for the evolution of global togetherness.

Conclusion

The concept of multi-sited ethnography takes into account that cultural formations are neither fixed in time and space nor do they evolve in isolation (Abu Lughod 1993). Cultures are made through complex interdependencies „that cross-cut dichotomies such as the ‘local’ and the ‘global’, the ‘lifeworld’ and the ‘system’” (Marcus 1996:95). Site has often been misconceived and equated with (physical grounded) location. The practical problem of multi-siting has then been discussed in terms of multiplicity of relevant places and, the quality of ethnographic research still relates to the “must have been there.” Hannerz (2003) consequently pleads that ethnography must become the “art of the possible” when aiming to account for all the locations that are articulated with one single research subject. Mazzucato also highlights the difficult relationship between the quantity of relevant places and the quality of ethnographic immersion: “The challenge has been to combine multiple locations with an in-depth understanding of the different localities” (2009: 215).

Fifteen years later Marcus has taken up the questions he himself had provoked by introducing the concept of multi-sited ethnography: “What prevents the fieldwork from becoming overwhelmed by the multiplication of sites, and what gives multi-sited fieldwork a boundedness and an intensity? ... What replaces the trope of ‘being there’ so central to conventional ethnographic authority, of inhabiting place?” (Marcus 2009:191). Drawing from my own work on Ciberville, my contribution to answer these questions are as follows: Multi-siting implies the study of movements and (dis)connections of cultural phenomena and the knowledge, skills and social practices used by particular people to produce, negotiate, appropriate or resist such phenomena in particular settings.

The principle of in-depth understanding of particular localities has been replaced by in-depth understanding of modes of mobility and relating to other people, phenomena and contexts. As Büscher & Urry point out:

“By immersing themselves in the fleeting, multi-sensory, distributed, mobile and multiple, yet local, practical and ordered making of social and material realities, researchers gain an understanding of movement not as governed by rules, but as methodically generative, This makes it less interesting to find and define ‘underlying’ grammars, orders, rules or structures but rewarding and challenging to describe the methods that people (but also material agencies, e.g. through design) use to achieve and coordinate grammatical orientations and the making of orders” (2009: 104).

This approach is particularly valuable for studying mediated cultures of mobility, where “each participant’s view is framed by her or his connections to others and the behaviours of those people [and] there’s no overarching set of norms or practices” (Boyd 2009:27). Ethnographers hence should design their research topics within the movement between the various sites and, be as mobile as their subjects require them to be.

Multi-sited ethnographic research is opportunistic research as it seeks for appropriate occasions for mapping the field and generating (naturally occurring) data. As there is no longer a field “out there”, field construction becomes a central part of the research results, because it reflects culture-specific ways of networking, (dis)connecting places, people and meanings, drawing and crossing boundaries and moving in-between. There are many possible readings of Marcus’ call for mobile methods. Ethnographers of mediated cultures of mobility can follow their subjects in a spatial sense (tracing the subject’s trajectories), thereby including as many localities, both online and offline, as reasonable. They can certainly also follow their subjects in a temporal sense (tracing the subject’s histories), as in the case of Cibervalle, in order to learn how social practices and communication technologies are mutually produced. They should, however, take into account the participatory role of the technology, which itself has become a subject in ethnography. Finally, the researchers can follow their subjects in a pure practical sense (tracing the subject’s practices); this means not only to participate and learn the field practices on ones own, but to adopt them as research practices in order to develop a set of uniquely adequate research methods, which itself reflects a mimetic image of the social reality it accounts for.

References

- Adams, Angel Parham. "Diaspora, Community and Communication: Internet Use in Transnational Haiti." *Global Networks* 4.2 (2004): 199-217.
- Beaulieu, Anne. "Mediating ethnography: Objectivity and the making of ethnographies of the internet." *Social Epistemology*, 18.2-3(2004): 139-163.
- Büscher, Monika and John Urry, *Mobile Methods and the Empirical*. *European Journal of Social Theory* 12(1): 99-116.
- Candea, Matei. "Arbitrary Locations: In Defence of the Bounded Field-site." *Multi-sited ethnography: theory, praxis and locality in contemporary research*. Ed. Falzon, Marc-Anthony. Farnham: Ashgate (2009): 24-46.
- Boyd, danah. "Response to Christine Hine." *Internet Inquiry. Conversations about method*. Ed. Markham, Annette N. and Nancy K. Baym. Los Angeles [et al.]: Sage (2009):26-32.
- Graham, Mark, and Shahram Khosravi. "Reordering Public and Private in Iranian Cyberspace: Identity, Politics, and Mobilization." *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power* 9 (2002): 219-46.
- Greschke, Heike M. "Does It Matter Where You Are? - Transnational Migration, Internet Usage and the Emergence of Global Togetherness." *The Making of 'World Society': Transnational Practices and Global Patterns*. Ed. Anghel, Remus, Eva Gerharz, Gilberto Rescher & Monika Salzbrunn. Bielefeld: Transkript (2008): 275-289.
- Greschke, Heike M. Daheim in www.cibervalle.com – Zusammenleben im medialen Alltag der Migration. *Qualitative Soziologie*, Band 10, Stuttgart: Lucius & Lucius (2009).
- Greschke, Heike M., *Egal, wer du bist? Paradoxien sozialstruktureller Positionierung im medialen Alltag transnationaler Migration*, in: Stegbauer, Christian, *Ungleichheit aus kommunikations- und mediensoziologischer Perspektive*, Wiesbaden: VS, (forthcoming).

- Hine, Christine. „Question One: How can Qualitative Internet Researchers Define the Boundaries of Their Projects?“ *Internet Inquiry. Conversations About Method*. Ed. Markham, Annette N. and Nancy K. Baym. Los Angeles [et al.]: Sage (2009): 1-20.
- Karim, Karim H. “Mapping Diasporic Mediascapes.” *The Media of Diaspora: Mapping the Globe*. Ed. Karim H. Karim. Oxford: Routledge (2003): 2-17.
- Law, John, 2004, *After method. Mess in social science research*. London u.a.: Routledge.
- Mann, Chris & Stewart, Fiona. *Internet communication and qualitative research. A handbook for researching online*. London: Sage (2000).
- Markham, Annette N. *Life online: researching real experience in virtual space*. Walnut Creek, CA: Alta Mira Press (1998).
- Marcus, George E. “Ethnography in/of the world system: The emergence of multi-sited ethnography.” *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 24 (1996): 95-117.
- Marcus, George E. “Multi-sited Ethnography: Notes and Queries.” *Multi-sited-Ethnography. Theory, Praxis and Locality in Contemporary Research*. Ed. Falzon, Marc-Anthony. Farnham: Ashgate (2009): 180-196.
- Mazzucato, Valentina. „Bridging Boundaries with a Transnational Research Approach: A Simultaneous Matched Sample Methodology.“ *Multi-sited-Ethnography. Theory, Praxis and Locality in Contemporary Research*. Ed. Falzon, Marc-Anthony. Farnham: Ashgate (2009): 215-231.
- Miller, Daniel, and Don Slater. *The Internet – An Ethnographic Approach*. Oxford: Berg, 2002.
- Uimonen, Paula. “Mediated Management of Meaning: Online-Nationbuilding in Malaysia.” *Global Networks* 3.3 (2003): 299-314.
- Silverman, David. *Interpreting Qualitative Data. Methods for Analyzing Talk, Text and Interaction*. Third Edition. London: Sage (2007).